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ABSTRACT

This study, part of a larger study of academic persistence, examined the experiences of 24 African American students who persisted toward graduation at small, predominantly white colleges in the Southeastern United States. Similar studies have primarily focused on large public universities. A qualitative approach guided this study with semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. African American students made up a very small, but significant part of the college environment for the campuses in this study. Among other factors, the research demonstrates the sheer determination and persistence of these minority students, who are, in some cases, a minority within a minority. Through their persistence, characters traits such as motivation, resilience, adaptability, openness, faith, and others can be explored. The study also shows how caring faculty and administrators at these colleges can and do make a significant difference in the daily lives of these students on their campuses. Their love, dedication, and passion for their work were evident to the researcher and were reported by students. (Contains 66 references.) (SLD)

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This study examined the experiences of 24 African American students who persisted towards graduation at small, predominantly white colleges in the Southeastern United States. Similar studies have primarily focused on large, public universities. This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on small colleges. A qualitative approach guided the study with semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. This manuscript represents a portion of the researcher's dissertation on student persistence completed in 2001 at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Introduction

In the late 1980s, Boyer (1987) projected by the year 2000 approximately 30% or more of all students in the public schools would be from minority groups. He stated: "it is the college that is crucially important to advancing prospects for black and Hispanic students" (Boyer, 1987, p. 39). More recently, Gose (1998) stated that overall college and university enrollment for African Americans was up 1.7% to 1,499,400 in 1996. Of the total number of college students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education in 1996, 10.4% were African American (Gose, 1998).

Although minority college student enrollment continues to grow, the concern over degree completion is sometimes a factor. According to Astin, Tsui, and Avalos (1996), "the undergraduate years represent a major leak in the educational pipeline for students from underrepresented ethnic/minority groups" (p. 6). Similarly, Stan Ikenberry stated he was pleased to see that the number of minority students had increased, but was worried that minority enrollment was growing at a slower pace than it had in the early 1990s (Gose, 1997). The under-representation of minority groups among entering college freshmen is intensified by their relatively low degree attainment rates during the undergraduate years (Astin et. al., 1996). The percentage of African Americans completing their Bachelor's degree within four years was 19.4%, within six years was 31.2% and within nine years was 33.9%. Comparatively, 42.7% of white students completed their Bachelor's degree within four years, 46.8% within six years, and 47.3% within nine years (Astin et. al., 1996).

Student retention is a major focus at most colleges and universities. Likewise, retention efforts are typically a strategic initiative supported by most senior administrators. However, Kemp (1990) argued that the emphasis must be taken off retention and placed on persistence. According to Kemp (1990), "universities should develop and implement programs and services aimed at the education and *progression* of minority students toward graduation and social productivity rather than retention" (p. 146). Cabrera, Nora, and Castanda (1993) also suggested that college administrators shift their focus to variables that support the student's intentions to re-enroll rather than converging on past behavior such as withdrawal decisions. *Therefore, rather than examining why African American students drop out of colleges, the researcher in this study chose to explore the experiences they have that lead them to persist and eventually graduate.* Levin and Levin (1991) defined persistence simply as a student's decision to not drop out of college. They suggested two broad predictors of persistence often cited by researchers: pre-college predictors and at-college predictors. 'At-college predictors' are the focus of this study and typically include: living environment, classroom experience, academic advising, extra-curricular activities, financial support, and faculty involvement.

The goal of this study was to provide faculty and administrators, particularly at small institutions, with practical knowledge and recommendations for enhancing the experiences of African American students as well as their persistence during their undergraduate years. The focus was *persistence* as an expression of the quality of student experience rather than an emphasis on number of students retained.

Background

According to Fleming (1984), African American students at predominantly white institutions face an additional challenge by pursuing their education in an environment primarily structured for the needs

and attitudes of white students. Williams and Wilson's (1993) study of a mid-size university in the Appalachian Mountains provides an example of Fleming's point. This study revealed three barriers to African American student persistence. First, the institution was located in a small county (approximately 27,000) with only 1.6% of the population African American. Second, the institutional enrollment was approximately 6,400 with a small percentage (3.6%) being African American. Finally, of the 320 faculty members, only four were African American (Williams, et. al., 1993). African American students attending small colleges in the Appalachia region face similar circumstances. These institutions are usually located in small towns with few African Americans. The enrollment is predominantly white with an average African American student population of approximately four percent. Finally, the representation of African American faculty and administrators is presumably small.

A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Reisberg, 1999), summarizes the experiences African American students often encounter at predominantly white colleges and serves as a prime example for the importance of this study:

> Having grown up in Boston, Tito Jackson experienced culture shock during his first week at the University of New Hampshire. When he saw only one other black face at an orientation event for 2,400 freshmen, he wanted to go home, he says. A senior now, majoring in history, Mr. Jackson has adjusted to being the only black student in many of his classes. But some things still bother him – such as when he is mistaken for an athlete, not just because of his size (6-foot-2, 240 pounds) but also because of the color of his skin. "It's gotten to the point where people just ask, 'How was the game this weekend?' or 'What number are you?' not like, 'What's your major?' " he says. He has found such stereotypes common at New Hampshire, where only 73 of the 10,000 undergraduates are black (p. A49).

As the researcher reviewed the existing literature on student persistence, it was concluded that the knowledge base is broad and covers a variety of institutions. Furthermore, there exists a fair amount of research pertaining to African American student persistence and retention. However, the amount of literature pertaining to persistence of African American students at small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges is relatively small. In fact, most studies examined for this research were conducted at mid-size and large public universities (Brown, 1996; Cabrera et. al., 1993; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella and Hagedorn, 1996; Dale and Zych, 1994; Davis, 1996; Eimers and Pike, 1997; Haralson, 1996; Norby-Loud, 1996; Rissmeyer, 1996; Ryland, Riordan, and Brack, 1994; Springer, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996; Tomlinson-Clarke, 1994; and Williams and Wilson, 1993). A few studies have concentrated on or have a representative sample that includes small, predominantly white liberal arts institutions: Astin (1975, 1993, 1996), Fleming (1984), O'Neal (1993), and Penn (1987).

Problem Statement

The problem was to describe the experiences of African American students who persisted to their junior or senior year at small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges in the Appalachian region of the U.S. This problem was worthy of study because little is known about the experiences of African American students at these institutions. Therefore, this study attempted to fill a gap in the literature for this population. In order for these small colleges to better meet the needs of African American students, it is important to hear about their experiences of being a minority at a predominantly white institution.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to focus on the experiences of students who persisted and thereby examine factors that enabled African Americans to succeed in a predominantly white, small college environment. This approach was chosen in place of a retention-based study that might have only considered factors leading to student departure. Maxwell (1996) noted three research purposes for which qualitative studies are especially suited: (1) understanding the meaning for participants in the study (i.e.

how they make sense of things), (2) understanding the particular context within which the participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions, and (3) generating new ideas that will contribute to the literature. These three purposes were applicable to this study.

Understanding the experiences African American students have on their campuses were important to this study. Allowing students the opportunity to communicate stories about their undergraduate encounters accomplished this goal. Understanding the context and how this plays a role in their actions was also important. In this particular study, the context was small, predominantly white colleges in Appalachia. The experiences of African American students in this context were not found in the current literature. A relatively small number of people were studied, which allowed for a more individualistic approach. Finally, it was presumed this study would generate new theories and possible recommendations for institutional policy and practice.

Significance

The uniqueness of this study was fostered by five key elements. First, the study focused on persistence as opposed to retention. Second, interviews provided a rich, detailed perspective from each student about the complexity and richness of their college experience. Third, the study focused on small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges (of which there is little known in terms of African American student experiences) as opposed to large public institutions (which are well represented in the literature). Fourth, the students' perspective on experiences that have fostered or hindered their success in college could be a useful tool for administrators. This information could provide direction for possible changes in campus policy and practice for those colleges who are interested. Fifth, the study focused on a particular region of the United States: the Appalachian region. Institutions within the Appalachian region have a small, but significant percentage of African American students.

Review of Related Literature

A review of the literature on student persistence reveals five influential theories that provide a comprehensive framework for this study: Tinto's Student Integration Model (1987), Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984), Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980), Pace's Quality of Effort Scales (1980, 1984) and Cross' Four Stage Developmental Theory (1978).

While the preceding theories provide a good foundation to the understanding of student persistence, various studies are also noteworthy. In Eimers and Pike's (1997) study comparing minority and non-minority student adjustment to college, it was noted that perceived quality of educational experience had a significant effect on minority students' intent to persist. Perceived quality was defined as the student's perception of academic quality, satisfaction with academic and social experiences, and affinity of values with faculty and other students. Norby-Loud's (1996) study on influences of involvement indicated intra-racial friendships as one of the significant factors positively influencing African American student persistence. Rowser (1997) examined what new African American students perceived their needs to be upon entering a university and concluded that misperception of actual needs leads to frustration when students are unable to meet their expectations. As a result, the student sees him or herself as a failure and eventually chooses not to continue.

Cabrena, Nora, Pascarella, and Hagedorm (1996) concluded that an exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination has gained increased attention as one main factor for differences in persistence behavior between minorities and non-minorities. Furthermore, this perceived climate created a deterrent for interacting with other students, faculty, and administrators. Overall, this disassociation negatively impacted a minority student's cognitive and affective development and her/his persistence in college.

Davis' (1998) study included data collection of campus tension incidents as published in the Chronicle of Higher Education from February 1994 through May 1997. According to Davis (1998), developing a healthy campus climate is one of the challenges higher education faces today.

> One of the greatest challenges for American Higher Education is to develop a healthy campus climate where opportunities for learning include cultural appreciation and reciprocity among people of diverse backgrounds. Many American colleges and universities have responded to acts of discrimination and tolerance by revisiting missions, implementing policy and broadening their academic curricula. However, as evidenced by this study, disrespect for others and discriminatory behavior continue to plague the academy (p. 72).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) considered the socio-psychological climate of many predominantly white institutions as nonwhite students experience it:

> It is clear that many of the most important effects of college occur through students' interpersonal experiences with faculty members and other students. It is equally clear that the academic, social, and psychological worlds inhabited by most non-white students on predominantly white campuses are substantially different in almost every respect from those of their white peers (p. 644).

Rissmeyer (1996) identified eleven categories African American students experience in the transition process on predominantly white campuses. Three of those categories are: connecting, persevering, and familiarity. Rissmeyer (1996) noted the *connecting* element as "the core activity during the transition process" (p. 80). This category is characterized by integration of the individual into the campus community. Students become connected in the residence halls, student organizations, the classroom, and off campus locations. *Perseverance* simply refers to remaining connected to goals through periods of frustration. *Familiarity* was defined as achievement (i.e. knowing) and belonging (i.e. becoming known). In other words, as successful African American students become familiar with aspects of themselves and with the college, the campus becomes familiar with them. This familiarity results in a sense of belonging.

Cuyjet (1997) suggested the need to look at the disparity between the accomplishments of African American males and African American females within higher education, especially on white campuses. Based on figures from the U.S. Government and the American Council on Education, Cuyjet (1997) reported that African American males have the lowest male-to-female proportion when compared to all other ethnic groups. Only 38% of African American students were male compared to 49% for Asian males and 44% for Hispanic males. In terms of degree completion, African American males, compared to females, also represented a lower proportion of their ethnic population receiving degrees in contrast with other ethnic groups.

African American student attitude towards leadership positions on predominantly white campuses is also a relevant issue. Arminio and associates (2000) found that most participants in their study did not consider themselves as leaders and some even resented the use of the term. Participants indicated they felt being a leader would "separate them from other students in their racial group" (p. 500). For some of the participants, "being a leader meant being part of the enemy, no longer separated from the oppressor or an oppressive system" (p. 500). Arminio's et. al. (2000) study also examined the importance of role models to student success. The study revealed the "difficulty many student leaders of color had in finding any [role models] on campus" (p. 501). Consequently, most students identified a family or church member when asked about this issue. One of the recommendations was that, "campuses should assess their efforts in facilitating students meeting potential role models" (p. 505). Similarly, Nettles (1988) concluded that a lack of role models was a significant factor leading to black student attrition.

The term *marginalization*, as noted by Cuyjet (1998), examined the student-environment relationship or the extent to which students believe others in the environment cared about them. 'Marginality' referred to a perception that one does not fit in, was not significant, and was not needed (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981). Cuyjet (1998) found that African Americans were more likely to feel marginalized or insignificant and not needed by the institution. The one exception was academic advising. African American students felt their advisors added a personal touch to the relationship by the simple act of remembering their name. Cuyjet (1998) suggested that advisors could be the key to addressing marginality.

Interaction between faculty and students is an often-cited factor in successful retention programs (Altbach and Lomotey, 1991; Astin, 1975, 1984; Gordon, 1994; Kobrak, 1992; Lang and Ford, 1992; Noel, 1985; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1975; and Toy, 1985). Although faculty/student interaction is not the cure all, Toy (1985) suggested that the quality of relationships between faculty and students is of critical importance to retention efforts. Based on Astin's (1985) research conducted over 20 years with five million students from more than 1,200 institutions, quality interaction with faculty was more important than any other single college factor in determining minority student persistence (Levin and Levin, 1991). Bean and Noel (1980) found faculty/student interaction to be the most positive influence on retention in a study of 944 institutions of higher education. Kobrak (1992) also stressed the importance of faculty involvement, specifically with African American students and listed four things they need from faculty: 1) well trained faculty who believe they (the students) can learn, 2) faculty who will take the time to learn the African American culture, 3) minority perspectives included in class discussions and course content, and 4) high expectations established and the assistance provided for students to reach them.

In many cases, the classroom is the only place where students and faculty meet. According to Tinto (1997), if involvement and integration are to take place, it will be in the classroom. Furthermore, his work suggested that faculty shape the nature of classrooms and influence the degree to which students become involved. However, he also argued that little has been done to explore how the classroom affects persistence and that further research is needed to "explore the critical linkages between involvement in classrooms, student learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p.600).

Research Questions

This study was exploratory in nature, which was reflected in the three research questions. Due to the focus of this manuscript, only a sample of results from the first research question is discussed.

1. How do African American students describe their experiences of being African American at small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges in Appalachia?
2. What do administrators at small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges in Appalachia report that their institutions do to support African American students?
3. What is the relationship between what administrators report and what African American students say they experience as minorities at small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges in Appalachia?

Assumptions

The primary assumption under girding this study was that each participant would candidly describe her/his experiences and perceptions to the researcher. As the researcher talked with students about their undergraduate experiences, the desire was to learn something important about what happens at their institution from their perspective. Furthermore, it was assumed that participants were making progress towards graduation based on: 1) their junior or senior status, and 2) their being considered 'in good standing' with their college.

Research Methods

Phenomenological inquiry guided this study. The phenomenologist attempts to understand a phenomena from a subject's own perspective in examining how the world is experienced. The phenomenologist uses such qualitative methods as participant observation and in-depth interviewing which yield descriptive data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). According to Merriam (1998), "Qualitative researchers are interested in undertaking the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6). The proposed design for this study was a qualitative approach. Specifically, semi-structured, open-ended interviews served as the primary data source.

Rationale

This study could have been attempted through a quantitative approach. Assuming there was effective instrumentation, a good sample size and significant response rate, a quantitative approach could result in a meaningful study. However, a qualitative method of research was better suited because it provided an opportunity to obtain *rich, detailed* information on a small group of people (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, by using an open-ended interview method, the researcher heard the students' stories about their college experience as opposed to being restricted by survey questions, which can be a constraining factor according to Creswell (1994). A final reason for choosing the qualitative approach was the concept of *meaning* - how people make sense of their lives and their experiences (Creswell, 1994). The researcher was interested in how African American students made sense of their lives at their respective institution.

Research Design

The intention for each interview was to ask semi-structured questions that focused on open dialogue. For the purposes of this study, semi-structured, open-ended interview questions are: "worded precisely in a predetermined fashion, while permitting the interviewer more flexibility in probing (Patton, 1990, p.287). Six broad questions were asked to invite students to articulate their story about being a minority at a small, predominantly white college in the Appalachian region of the U.S. These questions were developed based on topics related to student persistence as derived from a review of related literature and a pilot study.

From the very beginning, a major challenge in this study was race. It is was assumed that there may be some concern on the part of the student participants, who were African American, about being interviewed by a white male with whom they were not acquainted. However, the relationship established with a gatekeeper (i.e. contact person) at each college provided a good reference and a liaison between the researcher and the students. Based on the 24 student interviews, the researcher did not detect any concerns on the student's part about being interviewed by a white researcher.

The issue of race did not appear to be a drawback to the study. All 24 student participants appeared to be comfortable interviewing with a researcher of a different race. Only one student mentioned surprise that the researcher was white. This student expected that a researcher asking questions to African American students would also be black. However, this remark came at the end of the interview and did not appear to have any impact on the student's desire to fully participate in the research process. In fact, the student said it was not a problem that the researcher was not African American. All student interviewees appeared to be at ease and were very enjoyable to interview. One student shared "a lot of the questions you asked I had not thought of before."

A pilot study was conducted in the spring and summer of 1999. The pilot study was conducted at a small, liberal arts college in the Appalachian region of the U.S. Six African American students (five male and one female) participated in a one-on-one discussion with the researcher. Overall, the pilot study was a positive experience with meaningful feedback used to make adjustments in the interview process.

Constructive feedback from the pilot group of students, who were reflective of the population in the actual study, provided insightful information for revisions as well as familiarity with language and cultural norms.

The role of the researcher in this study was one of gaining entrance to the various institutions and the basic management of the research process. The first step was gaining entry into the four institutions selected for this study and obtaining permission to interview its students and administrators. The process began with obtaining written support from a regional associational office. A second letter and research synopsis, from the researcher, served as a request for assistance in locating interested African American juniors and seniors.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested a *gatekeeper* be identified for each institution participating in a research project. In this study, an administrator or faculty member was identified on each campus that served two functions. First, the gatekeeper assisted the researcher in communicating with the institutional review board at each college to obtain the necessary permission to conduct research. An official letter of approval from each institution was mailed to the researcher. Second, the gatekeeper served as a contact for campus visits and introductions with students who participated in the study.

Site and Sample

This study took place at four colleges in the Appalachian region of the U.S. To date, no study known to the researcher has previously been conducted which focuses exclusively on the experiences of African American students who persist at small colleges in Appalachia. The four institutions selected are located in four different states, either in a small town or rural area. A variety of church affiliations were represented among the colleges. The average student enrollment for these four institutions was 1,280. The average African American student enrollment was 6.1% of the total campus population. Identification of participating students and institutions is confidential. Pseudonyms for the students are used and only the researcher knows the identity.

The criteria chosen for this study were threefold: (1) African American, (2) junior or senior status, (3) in 'good standing' with her/his academic institution. The rationale for selecting African Americans who had a junior or senior status and 'in good standing' was that their experiences would likely present a more accurate view of successful persistence than first year students or students 'not in good standing'. Also, juniors and seniors were presumed to have an adequate understanding of their college environment and be able to provide meaningful contributions to the study. Six students were interviewed at each institution. Although the intent was to have equal male/female representation, there were slightly more female students (13) than males (11).

Data Collection Procedures

The gatekeeper at each institution distributed letters that invited students to participate in the study. After a list of interested students was obtained, an interview was scheduled at the participant's convenience on her/his campus. The gatekeeper gave a letter explaining the research project and the Basic Elements of Informed Consent Form to each student prior to the interview. The primary reason for following this procedure was so the student could make a more informed decision of whether or not to participate in the study. The letter to the student ensured them of confidentiality and that the information collected would not be used to identify them in any way. The letter also mentioned that their participation was completely voluntary and there was no penalty to withdraw at any time or to choose not to participate.

Prior to the interview, the researcher discussed the Basic Elements of Informed Consent Form and asked the student to sign two copies (one which the student kept). Also prior to the interview, an introduction to the research process was read to the student to ensure that they understood the project and

the confidentiality issue. With the consent of the participant, the researcher audiotape recorded the interview. All students consented to the use of the recording device and chose a fictitious name for reference. Each participant was given the opportunity to receive a copy of the tape if they desired. All interview participants were mailed a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy. Opportunity was given to provide feedback and return the transcript in a postage paid envelope. Of the 29 interviewees (24 students and 5 administrators), 20 (69%) returned the transcripts.

The students were compensated $25 cash to participate in the study, which was distributed after the interview session. The $25 was given to all participants who made a good faith effort to participate, even if they left before the interview was completed. The researcher intended the compensation to be a fair remuneration and was not meant to be a bribe or a patronizing gift. The majority of the students seemed to appreciate the compensation. All 24 students chose to complete the interview process.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological inquiry guided data analysis in this study. According to Patton (1990), phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (p. 69). The phenomenon experienced may be an emotion, a relationship, a program, a culture or an organization. In this study, African American students were experiencing life on a predominantly white college campus and persisting towards graduation.

After each interview was completed, the researcher conducted two primary steps: 'write-ups' and contact summary sheets. The 'write-ups' step was essentially processing the written field notes taken during the interview. Elements of the contact summary sheet included such items as: frequently used words, non-verbal cues, attitude, themes, reflective feelings, and speculations. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested both these steps for a more thorough analysis.

The next step involved transcribing interview tapes, which was completed by the researcher. Although this step was extremely time consuming, the researcher chose to transcribe all interview tapes for two reasons. First, it was more cost effective. Second, it was assumed the process of transcribing would increase understanding and familiarity of the data. The researcher was able to get to know the participants better through repetition of their stories. After tapes were transcribed for each institution, a full transcript of the interview was then mailed to each participant asking for comments on the accuracy of the document. Those transcripts with corrections were adjusted prior to analysis.

The administrator and student interviews resulted in 400, single-spaced pages of transcripts. According to Patton (1990), the challenge that comes with qualitative data analysis "is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data revealed" (p.371). An inductive approach was followed in the data analysis for this study. Patterns, themes and categories emerged from the data rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). The process of data analysis was based on data reduction and interpretation whereby data were reduced into certain patterns, categories, or themes and then interpreted by some system (Creswell, 1994).

Tesch (1990) explained this process in terms of *de-contextualization* and *re-contextualization*. De-contextualization, or segmenting, refers to separating relevant portions of data from their context. This was accomplished through an organizing system developed from the data themselves as opposed to an established framework. After data were de-contextualized, coding took place whereby abbreviations were assigned to data segments containing information about the category to which it belonged. Re-contextualization is the next step, which involved assembling everything that belongs in one category together so the researcher can read in continuous fashion. In order for the data to be de-contextualized and re-contextualized, content analysis needed to occur. Content analysis enabled the researcher to design categories that are pertinent to the research purpose and to sort all occurrences of relevant words

into these categories. The researcher also maintained a codebook that described the locations of variables and listed the code assignments of the attributes composing those variables (Babbie, 1990). The codebook consisted of field notes, contact summary sheets, and thematic index cards.

Methods For Verifications

Creswell (1994) suggested that qualitative researchers "have no single stance or consensus on addressing traditional topics such as validity and reliability in qualitative studies" (p.157). However, he also noted the importance of addressing validity and reliability in qualitative research (Creswell, 1994). This study addressed the issue of *internal validity* through *triangulation*. Triangulation is a collection of information from a diverse range of individuals and settings using a variety of methods (Denzin, 1970). Three different research methods were used: student interviews, administrative interviews, and document analysis. However, only the student interviews are addressed here. The researcher also incorporated *triangulation* by using a variety of locations (i.e. four colleges in four different states) and interviewing several participants (i.e. twenty-four students and five administrators).

Another means of addressing the issue of internal validity is the involvement of participants (Creswell, 1994) or a process known as *member checks* (Maxwell, 1996). The process of member checks occurred along two levels. First, each participant was mailed an interview transcript to review for accuracy. Second, the initial plan of the researcher was to obtain feedback from the participants regarding the conclusions of the study. Each of the 24 student participants was mailed a letter asking their assistance with reviewing the results. Eight students indicated an interest and were mailed a synopsis of the results. Two students returned feedback concerning the project. Although the responses to the *member check* process were relatively brief, they were positive and encouraging.

The second area to be addressed is the limited generalizability of the study's findings, *external validity*. According to Merriam (1988), the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings but to create a unique interpretation of events. The intent of this study was to provide *rich data* on four particular sites with a select pool of participants. It was assumed that results of the study would offer helpful suggestions to participating institutions regarding African American student persistence. In fact, each institution was provided a final copy of the dissertation. The assumption was also made that the results could be used to facilitate discussion at other institutions of similar size, mission, and location.

The final area is replicating the study, or *reliability*. According to Creswell (1994), in qualitative research the same rule applies to replication as to generalizability. While true replication is not possible, it was the intent of this study to provide detail so a similar study could be conducted. Presumably, the results had what Maxwell (1996) defined as 'face generalizability', meaning there was no obvious reason to not believe the results apply more generally. A multi-case analysis strategy was incorporated in order to enhance generalizability. According to Merriam (1998), the use of multi-case analysis with predetermined questions and specific procedures for coding enhance the gereralizability of findings. Four institutions in four different states were used as sites for the interviews.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study were threefold. The first limitation was that of generalizability. The study took place at four small, predominantly white liberal arts colleges in the Appalachian region of the U.S. These institutions are similar in size, mission, geographic region, and representation of African American students. Therefore, the results may only be generalizable to those four colleges. Perhaps the results could be generalized to other institutions with similar demographics.

The second limitation was in the area of researcher effect. In this study, the race of the researcher was white and the participants were African American. According to Palys (1992), the researcher should be aware of reactive bias due to the interactive nature of interviews. Ideally it would have been desirable

for the race of the researcher to be the same as the participants. However, based on the student participant response to the researcher, there appeared to be no complications with the interview arrangement.

The third limitation was the research method. Interviews, like many other methods, also have their limitations. The researcher's presence may have caused bias responses. Also, according to Creswell (1994), not all people are equally articulate and perceptive in an interview setting. Furthermore, the interviewer may not ask appropriate questions because of lack of expertise or familiarity with language or cultural norms (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

As with any study, there are sure to be limitations. However, the researcher found that written correspondence from the regional associational office in support of the study assisted with efforts to obtain the necessary cooperation from each institution. Furthermore, the gatekeeper at each participating college lent support in identifying an adequate number of participants willing to tell their stories. Finally, the pilot study assisted in adequate preparation for the actual interview. Overall, the researcher found the experience to be very worthwhile and enjoyable with no hesitation from the participants.

Results

Although there were multiple themes discovered in this study, seven themes are the focus of this manuscript: Approachable and Caring Faculty, Black Spokesperson, African American Role Models, Stereotypes, Environmental Appeal, Students as Sojourners, and Minority within a Minority.

Theme: Approachable and Caring Faculty

The positive influence faculty members have with college students was described by each participant in some fashion and served as the number one factor students attributed to their college persistence. In fact, all 24 students had at least one positive comment about faculty members at their institution. Positive remarks centered on faculty influence both in and outside the classroom.

James described the individual attention he received from faculty by stating: "It helps when someone else cares other than yourself." When Grace described the availability of faculty at her college she remarked: "I can go in their office and just talk. There are a lot of things you would see here [like talking to faculty outside the classroom] that you wouldn't see at a larger school." Grace continued with what was a memorable quote concerning faculty members and the motivation they have for their profession: "The teachers in my department are so excited about what they're doing and their excitement just bounces onto us." Similarly, the quality of faculty members was one reason why Cindy chose to remain at her present institution: "If it wasn't for the professors and if the college did not have a good reputation, I wouldn't stay. I didn't stay because of the students." In comparison to her former college where she explained the teachers did not know her at all, the small college atmosphere was very personable. Patrick's professors have also been a key factor in his persistence in college. He noted:

> The teachers here have motivated me to move on. There have been times like my sophomore year when I almost dropped out of college due to personal problems. Some of my closest teachers pulled me aside and told me that I needed to be here. They wanted me here. They helped me outside of class and checked up on me to make sure everything was OK. I was having trouble in one of my English classes. One of my teachers suggested that I go to the Writing Center, which was only opened certain times during the day. With my schedule, it was hard to make it during those hours. My teacher told me to do a rough draft early and bring it by their office for feedback. They made suggestions and returned it in time for me to turn the paper in.

While Jamar indicated that he did not talk to faculty often, just knowing they were available made an impression on him:

> I think the major thing the faculty and staff do is challenge the student. Everybody challenges you to do your best. It seems like it's more personal since we're at a smaller school. I think that is one thing you would miss at a larger school - the individual attention.

Faculty understanding and ability to communicate also made an impression on Voline, especially within her major area of study. She said, "They don't try to be above your level; they understand and they're like 'hey we were there too'." Marlene perceived the faculty/student relationship that of a peer relationship where both parties worked together in the learning process.

Some of the students mentioned the importance of faculty with the ability to be stern when needed and to have defined expectations. Lauren used the term "tough love" in reference to the faculty at her institution. She said, "Our professors lay down the law; they have tough love." Her definition of "tough love" was described in a brief example she witnessed:

> A student in one of my classes wasn't coming to class and the professor confronted him. He told the student if wanted to pass the class he had to show up. So the professors lay down the law...tough love...and tell them like it is. They don't just keep documenting absences they want to why the student is absent.

Nichelle described a similar observation: "I have some professors who are tough and basically say that your either do what is required or they will be seeing me again next semester." Grace also described "tough love" among faculty in a similar manner:

> They don't accept anything but your best. They hound you and you won't like it when they're doing it but once you turn your paper in and you finally get an A; it's worth it. You feel good about yourself. I have found myself going back and thanking them for not allowing me to turn in a sloppy paper.

It is interesting to note that Lauren, Nichelle, and Grace come from different institutions. Therefore, three of the four institutions were mentioned in terms of faculty members having some degree of what students referred to as "tough love". Other students also had comments regarding "tough love". Patrick said, "Most faculty will get on your case if you're slacking off (sort of like my parents)." Similarly, Voline reported, "Some faculty show 'tough love'; they don't allow me to quit."

Theme: Black Spokesperson

A smaller number of students had negative comments about faculty members. Eleven (four males, seven females) of the 24 student participants had at least one negative comment regarding faculty. One issue for students was feeling like the "black spokesperson" when they were in the classroom and the issue of race was discussed. Simone mentioned that if an issue such as affirmative action were brought up in the classroom, the professor would automatically look to an African American student for comment. What made the situation more frustrating for Simone was that in the majority of her classes, she was the only African American. Grace provided a representative description of how if felt to be the "black spokesperson":

> The classrooms want to make you the spokesperson for the black people. I'm far from that. It's not like I've fought them.....because most of the time I'm the only black person and usually the only black female. I know my feedback, coming from a different background, is important to the class. I know it's important but it gets tiresome. Because not always do I know the black way if there is a black way....the black perspective....it's my perspective and it just so happens that I'm black. A lot of teachers want me to give the black perspective and I don't always have that perspective. But it's all right.

Theme: African American Role Models

All students were asked during the interview what they would like to see happen in the future for African American students at their respective colleges. Liz, Kris and Patrick reported the faculty members were "doing all they could" and that students were getting the assistance needed. However, the one issue mentioned by several students was that of few or no African American faculty members on their respective campuses. Fourteen students (five males, nine females) mentioned the addition of African American faculty would be a benefit to black students' college experience.

Some of the students were quite specific about the need for African American faculty on their campus. For example, while there were African American coaches at her institution, Shequita thought there should also be African American faculty and administrators.

> We need black faculty. The only examples we have are the black coaches. They are not role models for me. They may be role models for an African American football player – but for me that's not a role model. I want to get my Ph.D. There are no examples here for me.

Simmone had a similar response and added her concern that the college could not attract African American faculty and administrators. Patrick thought the addition of African American faculty and administrators would assist African American students, but especially those who are non-athletes:

> We need someone who is African American who is not a coach but a faculty member. We have two African American women on staff but from a black male perspective we don't have anyone to turn to other than a coach. This would help the guys who are not athletes to have a positive role model to look up to.

Charles described an effort by his coach to bring in African American graduate assistants to better relate to the black athletes. However, the effort was not as productive as was intended because the graduate assistant coaches were so close in age to the undergraduates that they often "hung out" with the players. As a result the respect was not present from player to graduate assistant coach, as there might be with a faculty mentor relationship.

When asked about the curriculum at her college, Grace thought her needs were not met because as a black student, she was not exposed to African American faculty members. Grace described the impact one African American staff member had while that person was at her institution:

> She was the only connection that most black students had on campus, the only mother figure that was there constantly. We felt we could go to her and blow up about anything and she would have empathy if not sympathy. Her being gone is just like an empty hole. She just had that ability and that connection with us. The mother/father figure in most families is a stable figure. The guys have football coaches and some of them are black. But there is no balance for the girls. There is nobody to talk to about problems.

Similar to Grace, Voline believed the addition of African American faculty members would help give the African American students someone to whom they could relate.

> I think they need to have more African American teachers on this campus. I know that some of the teachers have been around African Americans but an African American can reach more African American students and get to them; they understand. I had a chance to come from a house...but some students didn't. They may come from the ghetto, or the housing projects or the bad side of town. But they (faculty) don't understand unless they have been there. The college needs to focus on African American teachers for our African American students to feel

> comfortable here. Just to say 'hey there is someone like me on campus and they have been through what I have been through.' Just to feel welcome.

John noted the importance of having someone African American students could relate to academically and someone to talk with who understood the black culture. He said, "Academically, we just don't come in contact with African Americans. It's just non-existent around here." John also said, as a freshman, he felt he did not belong at the college and that it would have been worse had an African American staff member not been present to assist him. That particular staff member had since moved to another institution but had made a significant impact on John's transition to college. John's opinion is that his college loses a lot of minorities each year "due to the simple fact they don't have a sense of belonging and there is nobody to confide in. There are no black faculty members to confide in." Marlene also reported how important it is for black students to have a role model other than a peer.

Not only would African American faculty members give black students someone to relate to, Lauren believed they would also serve as a good role model for white students:

> I think there needs to be more African American faculty of course. It would be great to see more positive role models; not only for us but for white students. A lot of the white students have had no contact with black students at all. I don't know what they have been taught but it would be nice for them to see something positive instead of negative stuff they get bombarded with all the time. Something other than sports.

While the majority of students would like to see more African American faculty members at their respective institution, there were a few who said it was not a significant need in their opinion. Charles noted: "I don't think we would have to bring in African American faculty or administrators. I don't see a problem with the ones we have." Kris added: "I've thought about the low numbers of black students on campus. But I haven't thought that a black faculty member would help out a lot." Finally, Nichelle noted that having only one or two black faculty members was what she was used to [in high school] and did not think it would make a difference to add more African American faculty.

Theme: Stereotypes

The issue of stereotypes is a reality many African Americans face at small, predominantly white colleges. Some of those stereotypes center on the misconception that all African Americans play a sport in college or have a particular major. As a non-athlete and Biology major, Voline described her experience of being the subject of stereotype:

> Many people have asked me if I played a sport. Some asked me what my major was and when I tell them Biology, they look at me like I lost my mind. I guess some react this way because they know Biology requires a lot of time.

Debra felt that she always had to prove herself and redefine the stereotype most people have about African Americans.

> I have to prove to the students that I deserve to be sitting in the desk next to them. I hate having to prove myself to people. Or, that I have to 'un-define' the stereotypes that they have. I don't play basketball. In the grocery store if I wear my college paraphernalia they say 'Oh, you go to [name of college]...you must play basketball'. I say 'no I'm here on academic scholarship.' They act really surprised. They ask if my major is Physical Education or Sports Information. I tell them that it's History and Sociology. They then ask what I aspire to be. I tell them I want to be a professor. They look surprised. So now I feel like I have to be a professor just to tell people I can do it.

Unfortunately, the athletic stereotype can also include the assumption that if a student is African American and an athlete, they may need additional assistance with their academic work. Patrick described a situation that occurred in one of his classes.

> My roommate, my sophomore year, and I were in the same American Literature class. We both did our homework together and studied together. We would have similar answers on the test but he was coming up with a "B" and I got a "C". One day the football team had an away game and they left early and were not in class. The teacher asked him why he wasn't going to the game and he told her he didn't play football. She said she thought he did play. After that, he got the same grades as me.

Lauren described how the African American social organization she belonged to was often viewed in a stereotypical manner. She perceived that the organization was only seen in terms of race. The organization on her campus was primarily established for black females but was open to all races.

> Even though it would be wonderful to have a black sorority, it's always going to be 'black'. Anytime we come together it's always going to be 'black.' When the white kids do things 'color' is not the first thing you see. But when we come together to do things, it's like 'Oh those black girls' - you know what I'm saying. That's one thing I wish we could get rid of. I think that isolates us even more. They aren't going to see [name of an African American Sorority] they're going to see a black sorority. Anything we do is seen as 'black girls together'. That's why we opened up our present organization so we would not have that perception.

Jamar reported that African Americans, on his respective campus, were treated differently than white students when the issue was off campus parties. Jamar perceived the stereotype was "if the black students are going to have a party, there will be trouble."

There exist also stereotypes within the African American community. For instance, a stereotype might be if a person is African American they should dress or appear in a certain manner. Grace described how she has been viewed by some of the black males at her respective campus:

> Last year, I was informed by the black guys that I was not a true sister. My whole thing is I'm in college and in transition. So, I go through hairstyles and fashion styles until I'm comfortable with who I am. Through that transition apparently I wasn't black enough for some of the black people which I don't understand that whole concept. I don't know how I cannot be considered black when I have the nappiest hair on campus, it's as black as black can be. The black males are not as accepting to individuality as the white people. If I come in with something that I'm comfortable and it doesn't fit their [African American males] fashion standards, they're critical. Whereas the white people say that what I did was nice and that they liked it. The white people say they wish they could be more like that and express themselves.

Olivia's perception of a stereotype placed on her by other African Americans was that they thought she should not regularly associate with white students.

> I opened up to the white people and talked to them because they talked and opened up to me. The other African Americans were close-minded and would not socialize with white people. Maybe the black students thought I didn't know what my identity was. It hurt my feelings that the other black students didn't take the time to get to know me and who I was. I think the white people opened up and wanted to know ME quicker than the black people on campus.

Theme: Environmental Appeal

The environment at a small liberal arts college was appealing for several of the students in this study. The perception of a quiet campus with few distractions was the most frequently used descriptor of the physical environment at participating institutions. Approximately 10 students noted that having the opportunity to attend college, without the distractions that can be present in a larger city, was an important factor to their college persistence. Jean said the following concerning environmental appeal as it related to the small college atmosphere: "Being here has helped me keep my feet on the ground and keep my head out of the clouds. I don't go out and do the party thing. It keeps me more focused."

Over the course of the interview, some students speculated about what their experience would have been like had they attended a larger college or university. The major factor with most of the students, in this study, for not attending a larger university was because they wanted a smaller environment. Patrick said he would have been "scared" in a larger environment and would have gotten "lost or left behind". Kris thought that a larger school would have been worse for him. Some of his friends went to a large university and failed out because "there was too much stuff to do." He said, "a large school would have been a distraction for me." Nichelle thought that she "would have gotten caught up in the whole party scene" had she attended a larger university.

William felt like he would have been "a number" at a larger university. Voline reported she "would not have liked being in class at a large school where I didn't know most everyone." David said: "Our students get two to three times more the attention than students at a larger university." His senior year of high school, Charles had a potential athletic scholarship to a large historically black school in his home state. On a recruiting trip to the college he said he "had such a good time he did not want to go anywhere else." The scholarship was not awarded, which worked out for the best in his opinion. Charles continued:

> I'm going to graduate from here with nothing lower than a C. It's probably the best place for me. I like to party. I would be very tempted at [name of local university] and would have failed out. I hear a lot of people talk about leaving but I'm glad I stayed. There are fewer distractions here and that's why I make the grades I do.

On the other hand, John would have preferred a larger university because he thought there would have been more minorities. However, John's thoughts about the reality of attending a larger university were: "I would have had more fun but I don't know how I would have done academically." John continued: "The small environment has helped me persist. There is nothing to do around here so I do my homework and study. At a larger school, I probably would have partied a lot and skipped the homework." Similarly, Jamar wondered what would have happened had he attended a larger school. He stated, "Having the opportunity to be involved with a black fraternity would have been one benefit of attending a larger university." However, when he recently met with his high school friends who attended larger universities and compared progress, he felt he was in a better situation because he was on track to graduate in four years. Some of his friends, on the other hand, were not progressing at the same pace. Consequently, he was happy, content with his college selection, and pleased with future career options.

Theme: Students as Sojourners

Some students remarked positively about the identity they had established in college. Olivia, for example, wanted to be in the minority: "I was tired of seeing black people. I had been around black people since I was in kindergarten." However, other students thought they had to change their identity upon entering into a predominantly white college environment.

One means of defining this new racial identity was, what the researcher refers to as 'students as sojourners'. For the purposes of this study, the term 'sojourner' means "a temporary resident" (Webster,

1988). As was the case with some of the students, African Americans can sometimes feel as though they are a sojourner - 'passing through' during their college experience. The term 'exile' also applies here: "a voluntary absence from one's home" (Webster, 1988). Both these terms capture how some African American students described their experience at a predominantly white college. James described it as "going to someone else's territory." He said that the adjustment experience at his college was not necessarily negative for an African American student, but different.

> There is nobody here for you to relate to except for the other African American students. You have to be ready for that and willing to accept it - that you are going to someone else's territory and not you're own. You have to be willing to adjust to their way of life.

Debra describes her sojourner experience as one that fluctuates between permanent and temporary resident.

> When I was a freshman, I came home for Christmas break and got together with all my high school friends and they thought I was white. They thought I was like the Oreo - black on the outside but white on the inside. They thought I had changed so much by the way I was acting; that I was so different. When I came back to school I was trying to be who I was in [hometown] and that didn't fly here at [name of college]. I'm talking about my slang and my attitude. I had to change my attitude and that was weird. I had to change a lot of things about myself.

The classroom can also be a unique place for an African American student in terms of feeling like a sojourner. William said, "In some classes I'm the only African American." He further reported, "If the subject is culturally oriented, the professor will ask for your opinion." Marlene said, "It can be tough being the only African American in most of my classes." Similarly, Nichelle said that in most of her classes, she was the only African American student:

> In most classes I've had here I was the only black person. There have been times when there were two of us but there has never been a situation where there has been more than three black students in a class I was in. It's just so weird being in a class where I'm the only black student. In some classes it makes it difficult. Like in Psychology class when a race issue is brought up, you have to fight everyone else's opinions instead of someone else being there to help.

Cindy had this to say about her classroom experience:

> Sometimes in class if group projects are assigned, I'm the only one left without a group and I have to go to the professor to be put in a group. I shouldn't have to feel like that. We should all get along....but it's like that in all my classes. If there is not another black person in class, a black student will feel that way.

Debra provided one of the more challenging views of being a sojourner on a predominantly white campus. Although she had persisted and was involved in campus activities, she was very adamant in what she felt was a negative college experience:

> Well, I really hate this school to be completely honest. I think it was good for me to go to a small college. But as far as the area goes, we're out here in the middle of nowhere with the cow pastures, sheep and pigs. There is no public transportation so you can't get to town to the grocery store. If you don't have a car then you are stuck. The people are so close-minded; they're not friendly at all. They grab their children when you walk by. I'm really ready to graduate in May. I'll probably come back for Homecoming next year but other than that I probably won't come back. I didn't enjoy my years here.

Another area where African American students may feel like a sojourner is the campus cafeteria. Both William and Cindy's impression of the cafeteria was that "blacks and whites don't mix." Simone

perceived that most athletes sit by teams at her college, which she considered segregation. Warren said of the cafeteria "everyone has their own place." David gave a description of his college's cafeteria:

> The African American students sit on one side of the cafeteria. The teachers set on the other side of the cafeteria and then you have the white students in the middle. I've heard people ask why the black students didn't come over and talk with the white students. Well personally, being a minority and being out numbered - I feel the whites should come and sit with us. There are more of them than us; so 'why should we be the ones to have to go and sit with them?' Me personally, I can sit with anybody to eat. It's not that I feel I have to sit with my own kind; that's not the case. It's just that sometimes you feel more comfortable sitting with your own kind when you know that other people don't want you sitting with them.

A few of the students mentioned relationships between African Americans and international students and the similarities that existed. This comparison also relates to the sojourner idea. Voline reported prior to coming to her present college she had no experience with international students and that it had been a great learning opportunity getting to know them. Lauren mentioned that several internationals were involved with the African American social organization on campus:

> I've noticed that the Asian students stick together. I don't know if they felt we [African American social organization] would be more welcoming. Last year we had a lot of internationals come to our meetings. I don't know if they thought it was easier to break through our barriers as oppose to sororities or other things. We're the minorities here and I guess they figure we can stick together. They hung tight with us. It was easier to approach us.

Nichelle, who attended a different institution than Lauren, also had an observation regarding this issue. According to Nichelle, African Americans on her campus had a lot in common with international students:

> I think I have a lot in common with internationals sometimes because it's easy for both of us to feel left out. Just like me - when they're in a class, they're probably the only international or one of few internationals in class. I guess the internationals feel left out sometimes just like I do. However, I guess it's easier for me to not feel left out because I can talk to people without the language barriers.

Theme: Minority within a Minority

Based on the findings of this study, sometimes African American students at small, predominantly white colleges feel like, as the researcher describes, a "minority within a minority." By being African American in a predominantly white environment, the student is understandably in the minority. However, for some students that experience was magnified. Students considered being a minority not only applying to their status as African Americans at a predominantly white institution. They also considered black non-athletes and black females in the minority.

Charles, Shequita, and Grace all stated African American non-athletes were a minority on their campus. Lauren, who attended a different institution said, "The college needs to recruit more African American non-athletes." Simone said, "It all starts with Admissions. The Admissions Office needs to think seriously about how they can recruit more African American non-athletic students." As a result of there being few non-athletes who are African American, Patrick described how there is a lot of stereotyping at his institution – that if you are African American, you play sports.

> I would like to see the campus be more culturally aware than what it is right now. Cause a lot of times we're (African Americans) are viewed as a football player or basketball player; like that's all we can do is play sports. There are some of us here who don't play sports.

Some students were not pleased with the athletic emphasis that existed within their college environment. Simone reported that her college is "an athletic school and if you're not an athlete, you're *just here* or you find your own clique." Simone further explained how she felt non-athletes were neglected at her college especially when it came to being recognized for academic achievement and campus involvement. Shequita thought her college recruited the same type of black males. She said:

> The biggest problem I have with [name of college] is that they recruit the same type of African American male. It's always the football player or the athlete who is not a bright student; who really may only be a mediocre player. They recruit these same people. It's like a cookie cutter; they all look the same. It's hard for me to understand. I know this is not an example of all African American males; it can't be. But that's the only example we have. It would be great if I could see a black guy on this campus with a 4.0 GPA that doesn't play a sport.

Grace relates the athletic issue to community. Her perception is that community exists on her campus for athletes but not for non-athletes. She said, "There is not enough non-athletic activities or organizations to make us (non-athletes) feel important." Grace continued by saying: "It might have something to do with no common ground between the black females and the black males on campus. The seven black females are not athletes. I would say 99% of the black guys are athletes."

As an athlete, Kris agreed that a non-athlete who is African American would find the college environment challenging: "if you don't play sports, it may take you longer to make friends. There are other black students who don't play sports and they normally don't hang out with the black athletes." On the other hand, Robert, a non-athlete reported, "having so many students involved in athletics is not a problem nor an issue." He continued, "I don't even think about the athletic/non-athletic issue."

The issue of being a "minority within a minority" on campus was also related specifically to African American females. Partially due to athletic involvement, the institutions that participated in this study had significantly more black male students than black females. At least ten students reported that their institution needed to recruit more African American females. At Shequita's institution, the females felt that they had nowhere to turn for role models.

> I think the African American females have been slighted because there is nothing here for us. There are so few of us (black females) and we don't have anywhere to go. There are a few boys we can turn to as friends but when it comes crunch time they're closer to their teammates than us. It's tough. Sometimes the African American males say they have it tough but they don't because females have no resources. We have no black role models to look up to on campus, no female role models, and no male role models except for the coaches. Even the black football players have their two black coaches to turn to but I have nobody except for my sister and she is all that I have. In terms of a female African American role model there is none.

Simone had a similar opinion but also thought because there were so few African American females on campus there were excessive conflicts between them. The fact that there was a great deal of diversity among the females, with no common ground (e.g. sports) made it all the more difficult to build community. Jean, who attended a different institution than Shequita and Simone, briefly mentioned the conflicts that have happened between the few African American females on her campus.

> Male to male the relationships among African Americans are good. All the men get along and they can talk about anything. With the girls, for the most part, I personally don't have any black female friends right now. It's almost like a competition between the black girls because there are so few of them. It's like 15 black females trying to get the best looking guys on campus – whatever that is supposed to mean. I personally don't date on campus.

Similarly, Grace shared that being one of few African American females on campus can be very frustrating:

> When you're one of four black females on campus it's hard. There are times when you are tired of explaining yourself and you want to go somewhere where you don't have to explain yourself. I'm from an all black neighborhood and I went to an all black high school. I never lived in the vicinity of white people. I'm in the minority here and I'm used to being in the majority. It's kind of hard sometimes but I've been here for four years so I've learned to deal with it.

Lauren also reported there was no community among African American females because they could not get along with each other.

Even the degree of dark skin can attribute to the perception of a "minority within a minority." One thing unique to Jean's account of her college experience was the observation of how she was received by other African American students. Jean said she has never had a problem of being a minority at her institution. However, she added, "but it's like my friends say - I'm not black so to speak. I've been raised in a predominantly white area." Jean clarified her comments below.

> I have light colored eyes. I don't have my hair cut off short. I don't have 'bad' hair whatever that is. I have a 'country' (i.e. mountain region, hillbilly) accent. I try to hide the accent. They don't treat me any different other than the occasional joke; but that's what friends are for. Other African American students don't consider me black. When we walk into a restaurant and we get treated badly, they say that I wouldn't have been treated that way had I been there by myself and they're right. I have never been treated badly. I guess it's because I have light skin and light colored eyes. I guess that is not what black people are suppose to have, so to speak.

Similarly, Debra described a situation concerning a bi-racial friend at her institution.

> I have found that the mixed students (e.g. mother white and father black) don't relate to the black students at all. There is a mixed girl in the [community service] program where all the students are close. But this girl is not close to the black students in the program. She is not close to the black students at all. She doesn't talk to the black students, she doesn't relate to the black students, she doesn't participate in [African American social organization] because she is not black; she is mixed. So, her adjustment was to get the white people to see that she was white.

At least nine of the students reported there should be more African Americans at their institution. Marlene said that her institution needed to "recruit more African American students, more than the 10-15 new ones we get each year." She further mentioned the need to recruit at predominantly black high schools. David said recruiting "more black students would help the entire group of African Americans feel more accepted." More specifically, the African American males mentioned that there should be more African American females on their campus. Patrick stated: "We need more black females who don't play sports." John thought his college needed something in order to attract African American females to his campus. He said: "We need more minority women. It's good to interact with people outside your culture. But you need people inside your culture to make it equal out." Similarly, Warren, who attended another college, said: "We need more African American females on this campus. Right now, there is nothing to attract black females to [name of college]." With so few African American females, Charles said that for males it was difficult "especially if you don't date white females."

Discussion

Based on the results presented in this manuscript, it is the intent to briefly describe what was learned from the study about African American student experience and persistence at small, predominantly white colleges. While the findings were directly related to African American students at

four institutions, it was assumed that these findings and their implications could be considered for other small colleges, especially those in the Appalachian region of the United States.

First, the importance of faculty and administrator influence on African American students as they persisted in college was significant. Seventy-one percent of the students indicated faculty influence as a persistence factor. Faculty influence was defined in several ways during the student interviews. According to participants, faculty have had a positive impact because they: cared enough to push students do to better (sometimes referred to as 'tough love'), took time for students, were willing to help, and had an 'open door' policy for their office. Students also enjoyed getting to know their professors outside the classroom during various campus events. It was clear that students appreciated the individual attention they received from faculty members at their respective institutions.

Although students spoke very highly of the faculty, a majority indicated some room for improvement. The greatest need for improvement was in the area of diversity among faculty members. The need for more African American faculty members on their respective campuses was reported by 58% of the students. Although most institutions participating in the study had a small number of African Americans on staff, there were very few African American faculty members. Participants specifically mentioned the need of 'role models' for the black student. Most students did not feel that they had an African American role model at their institution to which they could look for guidance.

Some students specifically mentioned that there should be African American faculty and administrators in positions other than coaching at their respective institutions. While coaches were a positive influence for the student athletes as well as some non-athletes in the study, there was a specified need to have a role model outside the athletic department. For the non-athlete, in particular, an African American faculty member or administrator would be an important asset. Some student athletes also agreed and thought it would be valuable to have someone (outside athletics) who understood the African American culture and could relate with them as an African American student.

Students also mentioned improvement in the area of classroom management. According to participants, there were times in the classroom when African Americans felt like the "black spokesperson" for the African American community. Students sometimes felt they were to present "the African American perspective" on various issues in class. Many black students did not want this responsibility, especially when he/she was the only African American in class, according to participants. Along a similar line, students reported that some faculty members were hesitant to discuss race issues in class due to unfamiliarity with the subject matter. However, students wanted discussions based on these types of issues, even with the unfamiliarity. The students felt that they, along with the faculty, could learn together during these times. Although similar in nature, the students viewed this type of class discussion differently than being the "black spokesperson." The students believed class discussions were more voluntary and inclusive. Being the "black spokesperson", however, was viewed as involuntary and often expected.

Second, the importance of college environment on student experience and persistence is also relevant. According to the results of this study, the small, predominantly white college environment had both positive and negative effects on African American students. According to 42% of students, the perception that their college (i.e. physical environment) was a quiet place with few distractions was an important factor in their persistence. Many of the students admitted that, while they did not particularly enjoy certain elements of the small college environment, they considered it the best place for them in terms of working towards their education. Some students speculated that it would have been more difficult for them to persist at a large university due to fewer restrictions [resulting in greater freedom] and the distractions of city life, where larger universities are often located.

The small college environment also offered an individual approach where each student could be treated according to her/his needs. The students seemed to appreciate the personal attention. The small

environment made it difficult for students to 'fade into the woodwork', which was particularly important for those students who may have struggled academically. In several cases, students mentioned how faculty or administrators would make contact if they saw signs of academic struggle through low grades, poor class assignments or excessive class absences.

Seventy-one percent of the students who participated in this study felt they made the right choice in selecting a college. A predominantly white institution was exactly what some students wanted for their college experience. This type of environment, they believed, prepared them for the workforce and provided opportunities for them to relate with Caucasians; a frame of reference some did not possess. Some students speculated the experience of attending a small, predominantly white college provided them with more of an 'eye opening experience to the real world' than a historically black college would have provided. Most students considered their experience a benefit as opposed to a drawback.

Third, one of the more significant findings in this study was the imbalance between African American male and female populations at participating institutions. The disproportion was evident, as the number of males far exceeded the number of females on each campus. The average African American male/female representation at participating institutions was 80% male and 20% female. The lack of African American non-athletes was also reported as often having a significant impact on the existing college community. The impact of these factors, at times, produced friction within the African American student community. Most students suggested increased African American student enrollment at their respective colleges, especially black females and black non-athletes.

Compared to Gose's (1998) findings, these figures are significantly different than the national averages for African American male and female college students. According to Gose (1998), "As has been the case for several years, black, Hispanic and American Indian women enrolled in greater numbers than men in the respective groups" (p. A32). As a whole, Black female college students represent 62% of the African American population on U.S. campuses. Comparatively Black male college students comprise 38% of the African American population on U.S. campuses.

These comparisons are particularly noteworthy as administrators at small, predominantly white institutions explore their African American male/female ratio. As college administrators consider their respective campus environments and their black student populations, attention should be given to the number of black females, which was remarkably small in this study. The small college environment can be a difficult adjustment for some students but particularly difficult for African American females.

Several students mentioned that having too few African American females on campus often created friction between: black females and black males, African American females and Caucasian females, and within the African American female population. In many cases, the relationship among black males and black females was often that of a 'brother and sister' relationship. In most cases, the African American males and African American females did not date each other. Instead, these students perceived each other, as siblings would view each other. Furthermore, according to the students most black females did not have an African American female role model on campus. Black males, on the other hand, sometimes had an African American coach they could turn to for advice. These situations, coupled with the fact that most African American females were non-athletes, resulted in fewer opportunities to connect them to the college campus.

The reason for the disproportionate number of African American males compared to African American females at participating colleges is unknown. When comparing with national averages, the incongruence is quite evident. The researcher could only speculate that athletics perhaps had some impact on the relative number of African American males on each participating campus. Each of the four institutions had an extensive athletic program. In particular, football, which fields more athletes than any other team, was a major sport at each college. The researcher is not suggesting that all African Americans play sports or that all football players are African American. Each institution is unique and would need to

consider its individual status as appropriate when examining the issue of African American student enrollment.

African American non-athletes also encountered difficulties in gaining entrance into the campus community. Many times these students faced the stereotype that all African Americans were involved in intercollegiate athletics. In a sense, African American non-athletes were sometimes confronted with double jeopardy. They faced the issue of not playing a sport when many people they interacted with, assumed this as the case. Furthermore, the black male non-athlete sometimes felt they did not fit into the African American male community, which was predominantly athletic, because they did not play a sport. Essentially, some students had the potential to feel like an outcast.

For the most part, students indicated that African Americans on their respective campuses were like a family and provided support for each other. According to students, athletics and African American social organizations were often the linchpins that fostered community for many black students on campus. However, black females and black non-athletes sometimes had a difficult time feeling a part of the community because there were often few members of these particular groups. As a result, conflict sometimes took place among African American students.

Conclusions

The researcher suggests the following as brief conclusions with the understanding that others could be drawn. Furthermore, the conclusions and the recommendations that follow are offered with the premise that each campus is unique and must therefore address various issues as appropriate for their respective institution.

First and foremost, faculty and administrators should continue to pursue avenues for strengthening relationships with students. The results of this study were quite clear that faculty and administrator influence is an essential element for positive experience and persistence for African American students at small, predominantly white colleges. It was evident that these individuals were already effective in their efforts to reach out to students of color. Perhaps similar efforts could be considered in other areas of campus life where needed.

The issue of "minority within a minority" was one of the primary factors discovered in this research. African American students at small, predominantly white colleges are, by definition, in the minority. However, among African American females and African American non-athletes, the issue of being a minority is magnified. African American females at participating campuses are especially a "minority within a minority" representing only 12% to 29% of the total African American population. The question of why this disparity exists is not quite clear. In most of the colleges in this study, the majority of black males were athletes. However, most of the black females were non-athletes. These institutions have various issues to consider for African American students, but especially female African American students who are far outnumbered by their male counterparts.

The question of what can be done in terms of meeting the needs of African American students who are a "minority within a minority" must also be considered. African American freshmen [especially females and non-athletes] need to talk about the realities of being a minority at a predominantly white institution but also the not so obvious "minority within a minority" factor they might encounter. This experience could be an unforeseen transition for a student who expects to be accepted by other minority students. Students might need to discuss the experience of feeling like an outcast among their own ethnic group, not fitting into the athletic community, or the frustrations that might come through dating relationships or the lack thereof. Administrators should pay particular attention to these issues as they work with African American students.

The importance and need for an African American role model for students was also significant. The idea of an older adult with whom to share cultural understanding seemed to be of interest to African American students. The term 'mother figure' or 'father figure' was sometimes used in reference to such a role model. The researcher suggests that perhaps the need for an African American role model is particularly important for females. Results of the study identified positive family influence as the third most reported persistence factor among all students. However, when examined by gender, females were twice as likely to cite family support and encouragement as a persistence factor. The majority of African American males in this study were athletes and in some cases had an African American coach to look to as a potential role model. Females on the other hand, did not feel they had this option. Perhaps faculty and administrators at small, predominantly white colleges need to consider these issues when working with African American students, especially females.

The notion of African Americans as "sojourners" was another interesting factor discovered in this study. Some African American students spoke of their college experience in terms of a 'temporary resident' or as one student noted "going into someone else's territory." One student used the term "Oreo" to note how African American friends at home viewed her as sometimes being black on the outside and white on the inside. These thoughts suggest the ability to adapt to two cultures simultaneously. African American students on small, predominantly white campuses sometimes fluctuate between their own culture and the temporary college climate in which they are a part. Perhaps this ability to be flexible was the result of their resilience, which was another student characteristic noticeable during the interviews.

The term 'sojourner' also pertains to the issue of similarities between African American students and international students. The comparison was made that both groups tend to feel left out at a predominantly white institution. Perhaps this area needs further exploration in terms of how the two groups adjust on these campuses. It is possible that information gained from one group of students would be of assistance to the other students and their adjustment process.

The term "black spokesperson" was mentioned in the student interviews. African American students reported how frustrating it was to not only be [in many cases] the only African American in class but also to be called on for the "black perspective." The perplexing question is: How do faculty and administrators negate the "black spokesperson" perception but still give representation and opportunity to African American students? Whatever the answer, these issues were very real experiences for African American students on small, predominantly white campuses.

In terms of future research, there are possible considerations for qualitative and quantitative studies. A similar qualitative study could focus on African American females and non-athletes given that they are often a "minority within a minority." This type of study could lead to further knowledge about this particular group of students. Perhaps a quantitative instrument could be developed based on the findings from this study. This would allow for greater amounts of data from multiple participants at numerous institutions.

Recommendations

The researcher offers the following suggestions for faculty and administrators as they work with African American students on their respective campuses, as individual need can be determined.

1. Consider the importance of faculty influence on student experience and persistence and continue to foster and encourage this effort. Encourage peer mentor relationships between African American students and faculty, but especially African American faculty.

2. Explore ways to increase the number of African American faculty and administrators.

3. Seek a collaborative relationship with the Office of Admissions, if one does not already exist. Both offices should explore avenues to increase the number of African American females and

non-athletes. With the disproportionate enrollment in relation to African American males, African American females and non-athletes are often a minority within a minority.

4. Consider how the college might reach out to African American females. Given the small numbers of African American females on small, predominantly white campuses, the need for an African American role model is sometimes greater for these students.

5. Explore ways to give African Americans an avenue to express their concerns and share their voice on campus. Town meetings, forums, and meetings with African American organizations are potential avenues. The question could be asked specific to each campus' environment: How do we make African Americans a genuine part of what goes on here?

6. Use freshman seminar sessions to discuss various stereotypes African American students sometimes face in college. Stereotypes such as being the "black spokesperson" and "all African Americans play sports" are issues that merit discussion.

7. Explore ways to work with local African American community leaders to serve as mentors for black students. Although most of the institutions in this study are located in areas with few African American citizens, there are some opportunities for this relationship to take place.

8. Assist African American students in working through their conflicts within their community. Conflicts that may come through interracial dating, conflicts between males and females, and the difficulties black females face by being a "minority within a minority" are all important aspects African Americans face on small, predominantly white campuses.

9. Institutions that currently do not have a minority affairs office should consider the possibility of creating such an office. If an office were not feasible, perhaps a part-time minority affairs staff position could be created.

Summary

This study has attempted to thoroughly examine what the experience is like for an African American student on a small, predominantly white campus in the Appalachia region of the United States. The researcher concluded that meaningful information on African American student persistence has been assembled and reported along with additional questions to consider for the future. African American students make up a small, but very significant, part of the college environment for the campuses that participated in this study. Among many factors, this research has demonstrated the sheer determination and persistence of students who are in the minority, and in some cases a "minority within a minority." Through their persistence, great lessons of character can be explored such as: motivation, resilience, adaptability, openness, faith and many more. The study also demonstrated how caring faculty and administrators at these colleges can and do make a significant difference in the daily lives of students on their respective campuses. Their love, dedication and passion for their work were evident to the researcher and as reported by students.

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